

El Salvador is a country I never thought I'd visit. So when I heard a team of airmen was going there on a medical mission, I jumped at the chance to join them.

I've written many stories about airmen at war in the past 13 years. So on my last Airman trip, I wanted to remind people that airmen do more than fly planes, drop bombs and help topple evil regimes.

At San Juan De Dios Hospital in the city of Santa Ana, I saw proof of that. In the week I spent with the team, I witnessed a group of amazing airmen at work. They have skills. And they not only restored peoples' eyesight, they gave them back their dignity.

The medics' professionalism, bedside manners and smiles made the United States more Salvadoran friends than any diplomacy could've done.

The airmen — ophthalmologists, nurses and technicians — made up a mobile optometry surgical team. Their mission: Perform as many free cataract, strabismus and plastic surgeries as possible in just two weeks. It was a tough job [See "The Sight Sav-
iors," Page 22].

There are many reasons for the visits, but team chief Col. (Dr.) Juan Perez-Becerra said what's most satisfying is the joy they bring people who live in a hard world. A place where the money an American spends on a movie ticket is more than what the average Salvadoran earns each day. Where making do with curable ailments is commonplace.

What touched me most was

Hilda Garcia and her son, Geovanny, waited two days for a doctor to see them. She said the artificial eye and plastic surgery from the Air Force team will give 18-month-old Geovanny a normal life.

the bond I saw the airmen form with the patients. They really cared, and the patients knew it.

My memories of the trip are like mental postcards etched in my mind. Each reminds me of people I met. An emotion I felt. A friend I made.

The welcome ceremony was one postcard. An army band played the national anthems. Then dignitaries

and hospital officials took turns thanking the team as national media reported the event. All

the while the airmen just sat and listened, red-faced from all the fuss.

"We brought our hearts, hands and abilities to help you," said Perez-Becerra of Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. "And I promise you: We'll do no less than the best we can."

The team kept the promise, though the airmen had to adapt to less high-tech working conditions. No matter. They still performed 10 to 12 surgeries a day — and no one griped.

The hard work suited Tech. Sgt. Jenny Grossman, an

by Tech. Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez



ophthalmology technician. She volunteered for the experience. But she got more than she expected. The people touched her heart.

"There's no better satisfaction than knowing you helped give someone back their eyesight," she said. It was a feeling shared by every one of the team members.

Patients are on many of my postcards. Most were older with big cataracts. Many had been blind for years because they couldn't afford an operation. Now a simple surgery restored their sight.

I'd never seen people as grateful. Their reactions, and those of their families, amazed me. Their joy proved that, for whatever reason the airmen were in El Salvador, it was the right one.

On one postcard are 22-year-old Hilda Garcia and her son, Geovanny. The 18-month-old boy was born without a left eye. Bone stopped growing around the eye socket, and it was closing. Without plastic surgery and an artificial eye, he'd grow up a social outcast. But with the team's help, the boy will have a normal life, she said.

"There's no way I can repay these wonderful people for what they've done," she said.

But there's no need for thanks, a nurse told me. The smiles are thanks enough.

Fanning through my stack of mental postcards, I realized my trip to El Salvador had been special because I witnessed a remarkable group of airmen at work doing what they love and doing it well. In the process they helped people see again, which improved their quality of life.

I saw Salvadorans who'd lost hope of fitting in regain their self-esteem. Because in a society where blindness and eye or vision defects are a great social stigma, these airmen helped people rejoin the social order. All it took was a simple operation.

In my book, that's impressive and totally cool, and warrants another postcard.

— Louis A. Arana-Barradas